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## Preface

In 1927, the entire Mississippi River system rose up like some angry beast and shouldered aside the levees designed to contain it. It flooded from Pittsburgh to Oklahoma City, entered the homes of nearly 1 % of the entire U.S. population, absolutely devastated the region along the lower Mississippi River, shifted populations, changed Americans' perceptions of the role of government, and altered American regional and national politics.

In 1997 my book (*Rising Tide*, Simon & Shuster) about this flood was published and, fortunately, became a best seller. The single question most often asked me about the book was where I got the idea. I always gave the same answer: "I grew up in Rhode Island so it was perfectly natural for me to want to write a book about the Mississippi River."

Generally people responded with a laugh and thought I was joking. I wasn't. Anyone as interested in American history as I was—even those growing up by the Atlantic Ocean—must recognize how central the Mississippi River has been to the nation, and the river always fascinated me. And to me the river never meant just a straight line running from Minnesota to the Gulf; it did and does mean the entire Mississippi Valley, a valley which reaches east almost to Buffalo, New York, north into Alberta and Saskatchewan, and west into the Montana Rockies. I was hardly alone in recognizing that; the most important academic journal for American historians began publication titled *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, though it was subsequently re-titled *The Journal of American History*.

The Mississippi Valley is twenty percent larger than that of China's Yellow River, double that of Africa's Nile and India's Ganges, fifteen times that of Europe's Rhine. Within it lies forty-one percent of the continental United States, including all or part of thirty-one states. No river in Europe, no river in the Orient, no river in the ancient civilized world compares with it. Only the Amazon and, barely, the Congo have a larger drainage basin. In terms of economic activity it is by far the most important and most productive river system in the world. For its entire length and the length of all its tributaries, it pulses not only with the blood of America's history but its future.

The river is America.

It physically created part of America: by the deposit of sediment it made land in seven states all the way from Cape Girardeau, Missouri to the Gulf of Mexico, including all of coastal Louisiana. It even made land outside its floodplain, as coastal currents carried sediment west from one of several historic mouths of the river west to the Texas border. In total it made nearly 40,000 square miles.

And the river did far more than just that. It directed the nation's expansion across the continent. It spurred technological developments in fields as diverse as architecture, experimental physics, and metallurgy. It created great fortunes. It determined the path of major demographic movements. It forged America's economic might. In blues and jazz and literature, in Robert Johnson and Louis Armstrong, in Mark Twain and Richard Wright and William Faulkner, it created America's soul. T.S. Eliot called it the "universal river of human life," and wrote, "I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river/Is a strong brown god, sullen, untamed,

and intractable./Patient to some degree... ever, however, implacable./Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer.../Waiting, watching and waiting.”

For me personally, as for Eliot, the river represents a mythic force, enormous and powerful and, if usually somnolent, sullen and dangerous. To me, images of paddle wheels peacefully turning over don't reflect the river; in the days when paddle wheel steamboats operated as other than tourist rides, there was little peaceful about them. They were rough and often violent worlds to themselves, as were the river ports they visited. A nineteenth century European had it right when he said of the Mississippi, “It is not like most rivers, beautiful to the sight, not one that the eye loves to dwell upon as it sweeps along, nor can you wander along its bank, or trust yourself without danger to its stream. It is a furious, rapid, desolating torrent. It sweeps down whole forests in its course, which disappear in tumultuous confusion, whirled away by the stream..., often blocking up and changing the channel of the river, which, as if in anger at its being opposed, inundates and devastates the whole country round.”

That wild river seems to have disappeared. Humans seem to have taken this wild river and tamed it in order to exploit it. Humans have leveed it, dammed it, paved it with concrete, dredged canals and pipelines and drilled for oil and gas through the land it created. In reality, however, they haven't tamed it. The river is perfect. Humans are not perfect. If humans make a mistake in their battle with the river, the river will find it and it will exploit it. Patiently, barely noticed at first, almost as if determined to mock all the human efforts to control it, as if to revenge itself on humans for confining and torturing it, the river seems set on an inevitable course of giving back to the ocean much of what it created unless humans change their ways. At this writing, approximately 1,900 square miles—twice the area of Rhode Island— of coastal Louisiana has melted into the ocean, and the land loss is continuing.

The lost land was productive ecologically, economically, and culturally; it created a way of life, spawned great commercial fisheries, and served migratory birds. It also served as an important buffer protecting populated areas from hurricane storm surges.

This book focuses on the question of how to stop this land loss; it explores how humans can accommodate themselves to the river, and the river to human ways, in order to stop the process of destruction and rebuild some land in strategic areas to protect population centers. In other words, this book is about the Mississippi River's future, especially the future of coastal Louisiana, and with it the future of the United States. The book deals largely with technical issues, but it's also accessible to lay readers.

The engineering aspects of the solution are difficult. Little can be done for some areas of the coast. In some areas even if funds were unlimited little could be done. And of course funds are very limited.

But, difficult as the technical problems are, the purely human aspects of the solution—the politics—may be even more difficult. Disruption of some people's lives is inevitable, and people will fight to preserve what they have; resistance to plans for river diversions, for example, has already started and it is intense. Other political fights are also inevitable, including over the most obvious question: who's going to pay for all this? The state of Louisiana has produced a Master Plan praised by environmentalists, scientists, and the navigation and oil industries with a price tag of \$ 50 billion for a bare bones minimum and an estimated \$ 100 billion to do it right. But there is nothing in that plan about where the state will get \$ 50 billion, much less \$ 100 billion.

As I write this, in fact, I am personally engaged in the first political war to be fought over who will pay to implement the Master Plan. There are multiple causes of land loss, including the levee system itself, the shipping industry, and dams nearly 2,000 miles upriver which retain enormous amounts of sediment— but another prime cause of land loss is the oil, gas, and pipeline industry. As a member of the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority East, the board overseeing flood protection on the east bank of the river for metro New Orleans, I played a major role in its filing a lawsuit against Exxon Mobil, Chevron, BP, Shell and 93 other oil, gas, and pipeline companies for their role in destroying the coast. Paul Kemp, one of the editors of this book, is also on the SLFPAE board and has supported the suit.

This lawsuit set off a string of explosions when we filed it in July 2013. No one has disputed that the energy industry has liability, yet Governor Bobby Jindal has promised to intervene and kill the lawsuit. Because I was instrumental in bringing the suit, when my term expired on the board Jindal replaced me. (Paul's term has not expired, and our board is one of the very few whose members cannot simply be fired by the governor—that independence allowed us to bring the suit—so at this writing Paul continues to serve.)

There is an old saying, “The flag of Texaco flies over the Louisiana capitol.” Chevron took over Texaco, and by the time this book is published, we may know if that old saying still holds true. Personally, I'm optimistic that a deal will be worked out, if not with this governor then with the next one. If it is, it will help solve the biggest political question: where the money will come from.

That brings us back to the technical questions. Can they be solved? Read this book and find out. And the other political problems—can they be solved? Stay tuned. This is just getting interesting.

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